



## Sermon

### Trustworthy?

#### Luke 16:1-13

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This is perhaps the most difficult of Jesus' parables! We struggle with it, don't we? The baddie is praised – fraud and deceit – what is going on here?

Well I can think of several parables where Jesus has a bad egg as the leading character – or maybe you would say, "But that isn't right!" Can you think of any?

- Workers in the vineyard – "It's not fair that they all get paid the same!"
- Good Samaritan – "A *good* Samaritan!"
- Pharisee and the Tax collector – A tax collector heard by God when a Pharisee was not!

However, none of these is as difficult for our Western minds as "The Dishonest Steward." Perhaps because the offence in the other parables is not so obvious to us. In our hearing, "Samaritan" has become a good word (because of that parable). But to the Jews, the Samaritans were disdained.

With the Pharisee and the Tax collector praying, we have come to think of Pharisees as the baddies, but to the people of Jesus' day they were the really holy men – certainly God would hear their prayers, while the tax collector was a betrayer of his people to the occupying power – a Quisling and a profiteer.

I said this parable is difficult for our Western minds: In the Nineties Helen and I got to know an Iraqi refugee who attended our church. When this reading came around he did not find it odd at all – to him it made perfect sense and he was an international lawyer! There may be a difference between Middle Eastern and Northern European cultures which makes it hard for us to get our heads around it.

What is clear is that Jesus sometimes used surprising or shocking ideas to make his point forcefully and memorably. We don't need to excuse him or make it more palatable – just get the point!

Jesus told this parable where a rich man had a steward looking after his property. Accusations reach the owner that the steward has been wasting his possessions. The word is the same as was used in the previous story of the Prodigal Son. This is extravagant behaviour – not wanted in a son, and certainly not in your manager looking after your farm and business.

The master calls the steward in and confronts him. "Give the account of your management, because you are not able to be steward any longer." The steward is in a fix – we hear his thoughts about it (v 3-4):

'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg - I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

These are idiomatic expressions. The Passion Translation tells us that “I can’t dig” was Aramaic idiom for ‘I can’t bury it or hide it’. Being welcomed into their homes was not about hospitality but an idiom for employment. When you consider that he was a steward whose role literally meant ‘house ruler’ – it is clear he is thinking in terms of employment.

He hatches a plan; people do not yet know he is being dismissed – he still has the books until he returns to render that account to his master. So he could discount the bills of those who owe money to his master and then they would owe him favours.

I have read that there are at least six explanations of what happens next. Here are two of them.

First: the manager (who we already know was dishonest) had padded the bills with profit for himself and so now he is reducing his personal margin to do a favour to the debtor but at no cost to his master.

Second: the manager is reducing the bill at his master’s cost. The deal is done and no doubt the debtors would go home rejoicing and praising the generous owner. The owner could refute the agreement made in his name by the steward but that would damage his reputation.

Either way, the steward has acted radically in a crisis for the long term gain. The parable continues with the owner (perhaps ruefully) praising the steward for his shrewdness – not for his dishonesty.

Jesus goes on to comment, that worldly people are often more shrewd in their dealings with each other than are righteous people. What he is urging is for us to take the long view with money – consider eternity in your financial decisions.

It is a consistent theme of Jesus’ teaching that money can so easily control us.

<sup>13</sup> "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

Love and hate – devotion and despising - Last week, in my personal Bible reading, I happened to be looking at the Ten Commandments. People are described as loving or hating God. My Study Bible clarified that this was technical, treaty language. Love and hate were not used as emotional terms but in the sense of being loyalty or disloyalty. It struck me that Jesus may have been using the word ‘hate’ that way when we heard recently,

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.” <sup>1</sup>

We understand that he is not advocating hatred in the family home. Friberg’s Lectionary observes the Hebrew thinking relates to single-minded loyalty in discipleship. This insight clarifies that Jesus was talking in terms of devotion, loyalty and obedience – God must come first.

Here too, in the parable, Jesus contrasts loving and hating two masters. Then there is a typical piece of Jewish parallelism – saying the same thing in different words. He restates it in terms of being devoted or despising. You can’t serve two masters, you be devoted to one and despise the other.

We can so easily find ourselves giving our allegiance to the pursuit of money. It is one of three things which readily ensnare us. Richard Foster named them in his book: “Money, sex and power.” That is why the monastic vows were to poverty, chastity and obedience.

‘... Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... John Rockefeller, the world’s first billionaire, received a now famous letter from his retiring financial advisor, Frederick Gates. It read, “I have lived with this great fortune of yours daily for 25 years. To it, its increase and its uses I have given every thought, until it has become a part of myself, almost as if it were my own. Unless you give most of your money away, it will crush you, and your children, and your children’s children.” ‘ <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 14:26

<sup>2</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 7/8/2001. By William Langley

What dethrones wealth from our lives? Nothing is as powerful as giving money away. That smashes greed's hold on our hearts. When you obey God's challenge to give generously, there can be a giggling delight in the action. It is simply joy – joy of obedience to the lover of our souls.

So Jesus advises them and he advises us,

<sup>9</sup> I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

Money is only for this life; you can't take it with you. Jesus warns that what you have done with money here (how you have applied what God has entrusted to you) will affect your eternal future. He is not saying buy salvation, but as we have often seen before, our works show what our faith is really like.

### **Test of honesty**

There was an old custom to test the honesty of a new clerk by leaving a penny in the desk drawer. If he found it and offered it to his employer, they knew this was an honest man. If he kept it for himself, they knew they could not trust him. For as Jesus said, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much."<sup>3</sup> In those days a penny would buy a loaf of bread so equivalent to a few dollars now. Ask yourself, "If you find some money is it 'finders keepers' or do try to return it to the owner?"

<sup>11</sup> So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?

<sup>12</sup> And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"

God looks at how we manage what he entrusts to us, to decide how much more to entrust to us. That applies here on earth, but also into eternity. If we are faithful to God in what we do with our responsibilities here on earth, then he will give us greater responsibilities here on earth, and if we are faithful in those, still more. And so on through this life into the next, where there will be rewards of yet greater responsibilities.

So the question as I close, is: Do you show yourself trustworthy to God? Can he entrust you with more? Jesus was teaching specifically about money but the same applies to anything else he entrusts to you: your abilities, your spiritual gifts, your leadership and influence. Do you use these things for his service or for your own?

Are you willing to break the power of money over your life? Pray about what God wants you to do and be bold to do it!

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<sup>3</sup> Lk 16:10